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AUTHOR Vallance, Elizabeth
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ABSTRACT

Ten American artists were commissioned in 1975 to produce sculptures as rest stops along the Nebraska stretch of Interstate-80 in celebration of the American Bicentennial. The ten commissioned sculptures were selected through a national juried competition that drew 121 initial entries at a cost of $500,000. Despite initial controversy centering chiefly on the abstract, non-representational nature of the sculpture designs, and the fact that none of the artists were Nebraskans, eventual acceptance in the various communities involved suggests a number of things about the elements of a "hidden curriculum" in these small Midwestern towns. Part of a three-year study of the role of the arts in smaller towns, the Nebraska project is described in seven sections. The first, "History of Nebraska I-80 Bicentennial Project," precedes background information on the study and a description of the project's logistics. Information on the sculpture titles, locations, and artists' homes is followed by short summaries of conversations with local residents--art instructors, chamber of commerce members, shop owners, gallary directors and others--recorded in notes and/or audiotapes in seven communities. Observations of the hidden arts curriculum and principles upon which a conceptual framework of the public arts curricula can be constructed are examined in the next section. Conclusions in the final section suggest reasons for the project's success and elements of a "hidden arts curriculum" in small Midwestern towns. (LH)

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The Nebraska Interstate-80 Sculpture Project and the Hidden Arts Curriculum of Small Towns

by

Elizabeth Vallance

Division of Continuing Education
306 Umberger Hall
Kansas State University
Manhattan, Kansas 66506
(913) 532-5724

SO 016 884

A report of a one-week tour of Nebraska in September 1984, and prepared in part for presentation at the 1985 annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, 30 March - 4 April 1985)

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The Nebraska I-80 Sculpture Project
and the Hidden Arts Curriculum of Small Towns

by
Elizabeth (Beau) Vallance
Kansas State University
and
W.K. Kellogg National Fellowship Program

I. History of the Nebraska I-80 Bicentennial Project

Ten American artists were commissioned in 1975 to produce public sculpture at rest stops along the Nebraska stretch of Interstate-80 in celebration of the American Bicentennial. This "I-80 Sculpture Project" was the product of a series of discussions among art and community leaders in Nebraska and evolved out of earlier suggestions for various large single monuments on highway. The ten commissioned sculptures were selected through a national juried competition that drew 121 initial entries; of the $500,000 total cost of the project, 80% was covered through private donations of money, services, and supplies; the remaining 20% was funded by federal tax dollars from the NEA and the American Revolution Bicentennial Administration. Of the ten sculptures commissioned, eight were completed before funds and time ran out. These eight cover almost the full length of the state, from near Omaha in the east to Sidney near the Wyoming border.

The project aim was to provide both Nebraskans and visitors with access to good contemporary sculpture outside museums, contributing to the public's enjoyment and providing a valuable heritage for future generations. The project aimed both to celebrate Nebraska's past and to make a statement about the vitality of its future. Highway rest stops were selected as the location of the project for a number of reasons, including ready public access and beautification of park-like areas the state was already developing; conceptually important as a basis of this choice, however, was the importance of movement in Nebraska's history and the historic and current value of stopping to rest on long journeys across open space. The project directors sought a series of sculptures that would reflect the qualities of Nebraska's past while providing enduring contemporary artifacts that future generations could enjoy. A condition of the commissions was that the artists spend time in residence in the local community discussing their work and working on-site when feasible.

The project had an approximately 2½-year active life. The composition was announced nationally in February 1974; the last sculpture was dedicated in September 1976. The intervening months saw this sequence of developments: in October 1974 a panel of three art experts (from New York, Colorado, and South Dakota) reviewed the 121 entries, inviting 46 artists to submit detailed final proposals. In

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February 1975, 46 final designs were reviewed by a second panel of art experts (from Texas, Chicago, and Massachusetts), who selected ten artists and four alternates. Representatives of communities near the ten rest stops reviewed the proposals and selected their preferences; the state department of roads also reviewed the proposals for safety and engineering feasibility. The names of the ten sculptors were announced in July 1975. Six months of public controversy followed that announcement, with public hearings in five towns and an investigation by the state legislature to clarify the state's role in and commitment to the project. There was some vocal protest but a much larger contingent of active support. Finally in January 1976 the legislature voted to accept the sculptures on behalf of the state. Seven sculptures were completed in time for the dedication ceremonies that began in the east and proceeded westward throughout the day of July 4, 1976; the eighth was dedicated on September 10th of the same year.

The project did not specifically seek abstract sculpture. The conditions placed on the sculptures were that they reflect Nebraska and/or the Bicentennial, that they be of a scale consistent with the outdoor setting, and that they be resistant to vandalism. Of the original 121 artists who submitted ideas, only three submitted records of past work reflecting representational styles; none of the 46 final designs submitted were representational. Nor did the project seek non-Nebraska artists specifically. The national competition resulted in only 13 Nebraskans of the original 121 artists proposing ideas; the one Nebraskan invited to submit a final proposal was not selected by the jurors.

The above points are important, for the public controversy in 1975 centered chiefly on the abstract, non-representational nature of the sculpture designs and the fact that none were Nebraskans. A third concern was with the cost of the project, a concern that was effectively calmed by very clear information about the project's largely-private funding; that the few tax dollars available to it could only be spent on art, and would be lost altogether if not used for this purpose, seemed to satisfy the "cost" complaints. Most protest concerned the modern abstract designs and the apparent exclusion of Nebraska artists. Most of the considerable public support for the project was articulated in terms of the opportunity it provided for the public access to the best of contemporary sculpture, the appropriateness of something so enduring as public sculpture as a state Bicentennial project that many people in urban art centers would not expect of Nebraska. The two conflicting themes--protest against "outsider" art and civic pride in the project--emerge again and again in the record.

Today the eight sculptures are wonderfully settled in their locations. Eight years of growth of vegetation and well-tended landscaping have created lush settings foe these pieces, which no longer look as new and bare as the early photographs suggest. They are part of their respective sceneries, and they are announced like any other item of historic or cultural interest by official highway signs.

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II. Background to this study

The I-80 sculpture project interested me from the time I moved to Lincoln in September 1975, though unfortunately not actively enough for me to get involved in either the town meetings or the dedication ceremonies, all of which occurred during my two-year residence in Lincoln.

The project became more important to me as my interests in the arts in small towns became more focused. A three-year study fellowship from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation (1982-1985) has provided the time and resources to study the role of the arts in smaller communities. This project, entitled "the hidden arts curriculum of small towns", seeks to identify the resources and social factors that constitute a kind of tacit public "curriculum" shaping the reactions people have to the arts. I select small towns because they are a kind of typical extreme, communities generally lacking major public arts resources such as major art museums or performing arts centers. All communities have a variety of traditions, organizations, resources, individuals and other non-formalized resources that shape people's conceptions of what "art" is and how they react to it. Small towns offer a microcosm of this informal network of resources.

The I-80 sculpture project offers an ideal setting for examining small-town environments and the factors influencing both support for and resistance to modern abstract art. As such, the story of this project is in many ways the story of Americans confronting modern art--some excited about it, some mystified but willing to try, some vehemently opposed, all recognizing that modern art was not typical of their communities' experience with art--but all in the unusual situation of being invited to publicly comment and to participate. Surely the reaction of these Nebraska communities to this unusual, audacious, and very-public effort to install modern art in their very backyards must mirror --more clearly and with better focus--the reactions of many American communities to quieter appearances of the arts in their midst. To understand how and why these communities reacted as they did to the I-80 project might be partially to understand the elements of that tacit public "curriculum" that many communities offer to their citizens. Ultimately an understanding of the factors influencing public reaction to modern art should help us to understand better how public arts policy enjoy generally might best help the public to appreciate and enjoy and learn from the arts. It is with these concerns in mind that I approached at last a week-long visit, in September 1984, to the communities along Nebraska's 500-mile sculpture garden.

III. Logistics

In the fall of 1982, while attending a meeting on another subject in Omaha, I stopped in at the offices of the Nebraska Arts Council. There I met Jan Mahood (Public Information Director) and some

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of the other staff. I talked with them briefly about the project and was able to borrow a 60-minute videotape on the project, entitled "The 500-Mile Sculpture Garden," produced by the Nebraska Arts Council. Jan Mahood remained a good resource for me, and I phoned her in late summer of 1984 about coming to the Arts Council offices to view files for names of people to contact on a trip west. Mahood referred me instead to Art Thompson in Lincoln, who had been the director of the sculpture project at the time.

Art Thompson readily agreed to my telephone request to meet me in Lincoln, and we made arrangements for lunch on a Monday. Scheduling around that commitment, I arranged also to meet with the current director of the Sheldon Art Gallery (George Neubert) and with its former director, Norman Geske, who had been the force behind the sculpture project. I saw Neubert at the Gallery in the morning; Geske joined Thompson and me for lunch at noon.

Thompson brought a folder of information about the project--press releases, photographs, copies of newspaper articles, and an invaluable list of names. The names were people who had chaired or been involved in the citizens' committees supporting the sculpture project in towns near the rest-stop sites, and both Thompson and Geske were extremely helpful in identifying people who were still there, who were either very favorable toward or had questions about the project. That lunchtime conversation shaped my itinerary for the week.

Monday afternoon I drove to the easternmost sculpture (near Omaha), then headed west reaching the westernmost sculpture site (Kimball, 25 miles from the Wyoming border, though the Kimball sculpture was never built) by Thursday morning. In all, I spent four nights on the road, staying at small motels in town. Interviews with sixteen people are recorded in my notes and/or tapes, and I spoke with numerous others more fleetingly--groundskeepers, other travellers, Chamber of Commerce staff, newspaper editors, shopkeepers.

My routine was to check into a motel around 7 p.m., and telephone for interviews the following morning, then to eat downtown while completing my notes for the day just ending. People were wonderfully willing to talk to a stranger on short notice. I spent about an hour with each, though one conversation was perhaps 15 minutes and a few went for nearly two hours. Some interviews were taped, when the setting was appropriate and I felt comfortable asking; six 90-minute tapes are in my files. Other conversations I recorded in notes while we talked and/or in my own commentaries added to the tapes later. I stopped at every sculpture, taking color slides including wide-angle "context shots", full-length close-ups, and details; the eight boxes of slides also include shots of some main streets, some public-building details, and some panoramic views of Interstate 80 stretching across the Plains.

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IV. The Interstate-80 Sculptures

The rest-area sites for the project were selected according to four major criteria: that the pieces be spaced across the whole state, that the sites be conducive to the placement of sculpture, that the sculptures not conflict with other attractions at the sites, and that the sites be approximately evenly divided between westbound and eastbound access. There are five westbound and three eastbound sculpture sites; the two never completed would have been on eastbound locations. All ten approved sculptures are listed here, from east to west regardless of direction of access; I saw them in almost this order, backtracking to catch eastbound sites in daylight rather that chancing daylight on my return at the end of the week.

	Sculpture	Rest Stop (nearest town)	Artist	Artist' Home
	"Homage to the American Bandshell"	Greenwood Eastbound (Omaha)	Richard Field	Northfield, Minn.
*	"Arrival"	Blue River eastbound (Seward)	Paul Von Ringelheim	New York City
	"Crossing the Plains"	York westbound (York)	Bradford Graves	New York City
*	"Erma's Desire"	Grand Island eastbound (Grand Island)	John Raimondi	South Portland, Maine
*	"Nebraska Wind Sculpture"	Kearney westbound (Kearney)	George Baker	Altadena, Calif.
	"Nebraskan Gateway"	Brady westbound (North Platte)	Anthony Padovano	North Bergen, N.J.
*	"Up/Over"	Ogallala westbound (Ogallala)	Linda Howard	New York City
*	"Roadway Confluence"	Sidney westbound (Sidney)	Hans Van de Bovenkamp	Tillson, N.Y.
	Not completed:			
	"Platte River Ribbon"	Cozad eastbound (Cozad)	Steve Urry	New York City
*	"Seed of Nebraska"	Kimball eastbound (Kimball)	Jerry Rothman	Los Angeles, Calif.

* Sculptures designated with an asterisk were covered in the interviews summarized in section V below. Others, though documented in color slides and in my own commentary on them on tape, had been supported by communities where I did not reach people to interview.

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V. The Interviews, briefly

The short sketches below summarize the conversations recorded in notes and/or audiotape in each of seven communities where I stopped during the week. No sketch is intended to do full justice to any interview, but they capture the highlights of each meeting as well as the themes that emerge across them. They are presented here in the order in which they occurred, organized by community.

Lincoln: Norman Geske and Art Thompson at lunch. Geske, as director of the Sheldon Art Gallery at the University of Nebraska at the time (now retired), had been the instigator of the project and the brains behind it, according both to my sources at the Nebraska Arts Council and to others I later met in the communities. Thompson had been the director of the project. It was from them in conversation and from the information sheets Thompson brought with him that I gleaned most of the details of the brief history of the project outlined in section I above. They were wonderfully informative and both felt the whole project had been a marvelous public art education project for the whole state. Geske is a distinguished art leader in the state, around 60, quiet, thoughtful, much respected by those I met later; Thompson is younger by perhaps 20 years, energetic, articulate, committed, an organizer, and people greatly enjoyed working with him. They seem to have been a great team.

Seward ("Arrival"): Don Dynneson is an art instructor at Concordia College. We met at 8:30 in the morning in his cluttered basement office in Founders Hall, now the art building. Sculptures and constructions hung from the ceiling, leaned against walls and furniture. Dynneson is a practicing sculptor (I saw later works in an exhibit in Kearney, wonderfully whimsical), had been one of the 13 Nebraskans submitting entries in the first round of the I-80 project, had been a staunch supporter all along. He's sensitive to the flow of travel across the Plains, historically and now, and to the role public art can play in enriching that experience. His ideas for roadside sculpture have included gigantic pioneer musical instruments and an elephant constructed of parts spaced along the highway such that only at one moment in driving past would the image of the elephant be intact, almost subliminally. He'd been present at an art department party in Seward where the original single-monument idea evolved into the concept of sculptures spaced along the rest stops. He saw Seward as very supportive of the project, a more sophisticated community than most, with the college there and Lincoln nearby; the murals I'd seen downtown and the painted watertower at the southern entrance to town reflect the community's receptiveness to the visual arts. He recalls no real protest. Our most interesting conversation (of many) was around his suggestion the Paul Von Ringelheim worked especially well with people because he demonstrated and talked about the technical engineering expertise required of his project; when he spoke to community groups he avoided artistic metaphors and

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spoke in a language of practical problem-solving that farmers and many others could appreciate. Dynneson had earlier expressed a regret over the continuing dominance of east-coast art and the resulting low profile of midwest artists; Von Ringelheim's down-to-earth approach to his artistic challenge in Seward seems to have dispelled many related concerns that non-artist townspeople may have had. (Taped)

Ronald Marxhausen: Also an instructor at the college, now semi-retired, a major figure in art education in Nebraska according to many I talked with on this trip. A high-energy grey-haired man of 62, he met me on his front porch and took me to the large studio shed in the back yard, where we sat on the porch in metal chairs and had a rapid conversation for an hour or so. Marx came to Nebraska from Chicago over 20 years ago with something of a missionary spirit about bringing the arts to this region, has been excited at the level of energy about art here. He was sponsored for about ten years by Banker's Life in Lincoln to visit communities both in Nebraska and nationwide, demonstrating through photography and other media how aesthetic views of everyday details can change one's perspective on them; he talked at great length about that work and about some related films he has produced... His involvement in the I-80 project was intensive; he sees the whole thing as at least partly his idea, and he worked closely with Geske especially during the public-review stage, attending the five town meetings and fielding questions about the project everywhere he went. He says the community involvement in the project at its various stages was essential: the public was able to meet with artists, see them as people solving problems and working hard, appreciate them for caring about their work. The public exposure to art as work was important. The controversy itself was exciting and invaluable, he says: that that level of excitement could be generated about art was important, both for the success of the project and as a public art education effort generally (this agrees with a point Geske had made). The controversy demonstrated how important art can be to people and it helped to demystify it at the same time. (Taped, photographs)

Harold Davisson: Geske and Thompson had mentioned him as a prime and vocal opponent of the project; Dynneson and Marxhausen concurred; all agreed he'd be worth meeting. Davisson has run a hardware/lumber store for decades, a large operation well placed behind a large lawn in a largely residential area. Davisson is a crusty older gentleman, something of a town character who is respected for acting on the things he cares about. He cared a lot about the I-80 project, finding it then (and still) a ridiculous waste of money. The lawn of his store boasts a white cement zigzag structure that is his sculpture for the I-80 project, dedicated the same day and costing "only $600 and five minutes to think up." I found him in his office; he was courteous and willing to talk. He opposed the project on two grounds: these things "aren't sculpture," and the cost was outrageous even if it wasn't public money. He readily admits to not

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knowing much about art, does not understand what is supposed to make great art great (he had watched students copying masterworks in European museums and preferred the students' work--brighter colors, cleaner lines), but he has travelled a lot to major cities in this country and Europe and "sculpture" seems to mean "statues of people" though he did not exactly say so. The I-80 pieces are, instead, "markers". He went through a sheaf of glossy photos of the pieces, pointing to "only one that took any work"--"Crossing the Plains", the massive limestone grouping at York, clearly reflected hard physical labor and the artist actually making the work, an activity he clearly distinguished from the tall aluminum "Arrival" which he says the artist merely drew and had other people fabricate and assemble. The grudging respect he accorded to that one piece was solely for the effort it required... Our conversation went on for a while, and included a visit inside the 15-foot-high white pyramid covering the "world's largest time capsule" that includes a Chevy Vega and a Kawasaki motorcycle, both visible through homemade periscopes. The time capsule and the pyramid both include colorful murals, what he calls "real pictures", done by local people, pictures of farm scenes, a locomotive, other everyday scenes (bright colors clean lines)...Davisson's views on what art is and isn't are important for many reasons. He may speak for many people, and he does so very publicly, for he publishes a regular 4-page newspaper (the center two pages are ads for his store) and has a radio station. He is very visible and was a very vocal protester of the project. I thoroughly enjoyed meeting him and appreciated his candor and his energy. (Slides)

Cozad: Cozad was one of two communities (both very enthusiastic--"great towns", Gaske & Thompson had said) where sculptures had been commissioned but not completed. I had names of people to meet with in Cozad and stayed there one night but could reach neither woman...I did speak with a young woman at the Chamber of Commerce, however, who spoke with a smile about the project, said it had been a rather exciting thing for the community to be involved in ("all the higher-class people were involved", she said), and that people had been really very sad and disappointed when it didn't come through. She suggested I try the newspaper office for more information. I did. The editor had been working in Fremont at the time of the project: he had written an editorial supporting it and had felt that he was bucking the tide of public opinion then. Now, he says, people seem to accept the sculptures. (He also told me of the painter Robert Henri's connection to Cozad: John Cozad had been his father, who got off the train at the 100th meridian to establish a town; the father later was involved in a shooting, left town, and both sons changed their last names--Henri perhaps "Frenched up his middle name" or something. The family house, a hotel, is being restored as part of a whole historical-park development; I stopped by.)

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Ogallala ("Up/Over"):

Dick Roeser: A tall distinguished man with grey hair and a deep radio voice, manager of station KMCX; we had a hurried but helpful visit when I dropped in. He and Anne Svoboda had been the people most involved from Ogallala, had gone to Lincoln one snowy night to review the designs ("hundreds"), selecting five candidates for their site. He remembered some that were wonderful but unfeasible--one involving neon and others incorporating the highway and median strip. Community reaction at the time? At first kind of negative, he said; this is a farm community not used to such things, but gradually people became more accepting. Overall he felt the community's involvement was "a good thing to do" and wishes it could be continued somehow. He makes a point of stopping at the sculptures in the summers and talking to tourists: most like it, a lot don't understand it, but he's found no anger or hostility, and the student guides working there in the summer seem to like the pieces and to be proud of them...He phoned Ann Svoboda and made an appointment for me.

Anne Svoboda: An elegant lady in a khaki skirt and Birkenstock sandals, she met me in her spacious home and we sat in easy chairs sharing a soft drink. She'd been an art teacher in Omaha before having her nine children, is a strong believer in the importance of early exposure to the arts, and hosted Linda Howard in various ways during her visits to work on the sculpture. She saw the project as an excellent way to educate the Nebraska people about art and to allow kids who might never encounter sculpture to live with it. She says people generally thought the Ogallala sculpture was one of the better ones; she was active in recruiting support for it (through the AAUW largely, as there was no Arts Council at the time), though it was something of an uphill battle at first. Many people didn't like it, weren't comfortable with its abstract design; men were more adamant against it than women--most of the opposition came from the JC's and other service clubs (compare this to Kimball, below). Support gathered momentum after Svoboda and the sculptor appeared on "The Today Show" on a story about Nebraska and the Bicentennial that also included the football hero Vince Ferragamo; the national exposure and the legitimacy it accorded seemed effectively to quell the opposition. Linda Howard, the sculptor, was viewed as an outsider, "a real New York artist", but she had a good talk that she presented well and she had good turnouts at public meetings. Svoboda recommended (and I bought) John Janovy's Back in Keith County, a portrait of the region that opens with an account of "Erma's Desire", the controversial sculpture at Kearney. Svoboda's daughter Terese is a publishing poet in New York; Svoboda was the force behind the Arts Council that now exists; she is one of those civic art leaders who make a real difference to a community.

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Ada McGinley: Geske and Thompson as well as Dick Roeser had mentioned her to me. McGinley is a strong dignified ranch wife, a widow living in a grand old home on the property her husband's family had homesteaded northeast of Ogallala; her 101-year-old mother lives with her. I'd talked with her once on the telephone and she invited me out to the house when I came back through town later in the week. Linda Howard had lived with her during her residency with the project, having requested a farm experience. McGinley wasn't especially interested in the sculpture project but as a good citizen who has put in her time on library boards and other good causes, was generous with her space and willing to be helpful. She saw Linda Howard as definitely 'different", a woman who "seemed younger than her age" (40 or so), "divorced and with her own ideas". McGinley, a gracious lady who has lived here since she was a bride at 19, was one who saw the value of the project although she had reservations: "sure, it's important to be exposed to other cultures..." but the cost of the project troubled her (no, it wasn't tax money but those corporations got tax write-offs), as did the fact that no Nebraska artists were represented. McGinley's support of the project seemed from a sense of civic duty, and she came to appreciate the "different" perspective the artist brought to the community for a while. (Taped)

Jim Thompson: Dick Roeser had suggested I find him. Thompson runs the Thompson Pedo Labs, a small mail-order dental lab in a bungalow behind a dental office. He was mayor from 1976 to 1980, does sculpture himself. His bookshelves are filled with volumes on public speaking, personal command power, self-hypnosis, psycho-logic, power of mystical healing. I expected a tall man with a booming voice: Thompson was a gentle small man with a mustache and twinkly eyes and a real passion for making things with his hands--he showed me photos of the abstract white fiberglass pieces he bases on fishing motifs, most of them on display in his or friends' yards. Actually he had not been involved in the I-80 project and had little to say bout it (odd, since he'd been mayor in 1976). He talked eloquently, however, about the beauty of seeing art "everywhere", the richness of small details, the importance of paying attention to small things, the sources of his own ideas for sculpture. he knew of the Garden of Eden in Kansas and would like to visit it; I located it for him on the map on which he has scattered pushpins indicating the extent of his mail-order business. He gave me a copy of his volume of poetry from a file drawer; the cover is a photograph of a sculpture entitled "Fresh Aire" and dedicated to the Solidarity movement...We had a lovely though not long conversation, very moving really, this encounter with a man for whom sculpture is an avocation and a love. He seemed to enjoy the meeting also. It was a special surprise.

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Sidney ("Roadway Confluence"): Millie Elwell was my contact in Sidney, and she agreed to see me at her house an hour after I called her on Wednesday evening. She is the high school art teacher; her husband Frank owns the Chrysler dealership and both of them were there for my visit. Millie was a delight, one of my best interviews. In the hour between my call and my visit she had assembled scrapbooks on the sculpture project; she'd been the local organizer, had thoroughly enjoyed it, and was glad to be talking about it again. She describes the summer of the sculpture project as "a very gala summer", "really neat", when people opened their homes to the artist (Hans Van de Bovenkamp) for gala picnics and parties; a lot was going on. Blue-collar workers who had never looked at art before were among the volunteers helping to assemble the tall aluminum structure; once people saw the design and talked with the sculptor they accepted and enjoyed it. The project had the full support and cooperation of the newspaper; banks donated money, and support was "fine". There were good-natured jokes about the sculpture and some letters to the editor about the absence of Nebraska sculptors in the project, but the only real opposition she recalls was from some old families, some "not fun people". In general the whole event was a wonderful thing for Sidney, which was "tickled to death to get one (of the sculptures)" especially given the friendly competition already existing among western Nebraska towns in high-school football...I asked what she thought the "hidden arts curriculum" in Sidney might be. She instantly said it was people, people who travel, learn things, pass on their knowledge through the new Art Guild, in the May Art Festival, through collections in their homes--the people knowledgable about the arts become a real pool of resources, and this network acts as a very effective kind of tacit curriculum. Frank mentioned the oil boom: 25 years ago there was a sudden influx of educated people in town (geologists, engineers), and this plus some funding from the Ford Foundation for the Panhandle Players and other arts activities created a real core of people committed to the arts. Both Millie and Frank felt that the citizens of Sidney were proud of its heritage and receptive to hosting a piece of modern art for that reason. I spent over two hours at the Elwells' house, including a tour of the paintings by Millie and her daughter (who teaches elementary art); Millie is a niece of John Steuart Curry and has a drawing or two of his as well. She's a wonderfully warm enthusiastic person whose obvious delight in the I-80 project and in community arts involvement generally made for an especially rewarding visit.

Kimball (sculpture never completed): Nate Eastman is a real estate agent and had been manager of the Chamber of Commerce at the time of the project. Eastman is a dapper gentleman with Toscanini hair and a blue blazer, a pilot and a geologist by training. Eastman had found the whole project "a great thing", as did the Rotarians and their wives: "it was kind of an honor, I think, to have one of these sculptures in your community, and we were very sad when it didn't come". The community meetings organizing for the project drew 100-150 people: "It's a real

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nice town here and people really got behind it". A small protest faction organized in a local bar with a petition, and there have been jokes about "Erma's Desire" and ribald comments about the tall "Roadway Confluence" sculpture in Sidney, "but I think this is what makes America great anyway, instead of getting uptight about it people can make jokes and tell stories". In Kimball it was a matter of civic pride for a community that had effectively organized in support of other projects in the past (a local irrigation lake was the example); there was some excitement too about the site that had been chosen, a spectacular spot high on a hill -- it would have been tremendous. Kimball and Cozad, the two towns that finally did not get the sculptures that had been commissioned, seemed to be two of the most enthusiastic participants in the project. "Sad" was the word that both Eastman and the young lady in Cozad had used to describe their disappointment. The towns had been ready. (Taped).

Kearney ("Nebraska Wind Sculpture")

Larry Peterson: Art instructor at Kearney State College, a major source on the Nebraska Art Collection which he had helped start in the mid-1970s. He and Gary Zoruba have nurtured the Collection largely on their own time; it now has works valued at a million and a half dollars and some funds from grants and other sources. It needs a curator, catalog, and a building. The Collection fills a need: the Jocelyn Art Museum in Omaha does surveys, the Sheldon in Lincoln emphasizes 20th century American art, but no one was specifically collecting Nebraska artists. The collection is now in a large vault, which Peterson showed me -- racks of paintings, drawers of prints, nicely stored but invisible to the public except on community tours. The tours are well received -- "we could do them every week" -- arranged by local arts councils, banks, schools, etc; a banker in Lodgepole got the whole town and all the schoolchildren to turn out for the exhibit there. Travelling shows are selected according to community interests -- emphasizing local artists, local scenery, some connection to the locale; this seems to work. The public is immensely receptive to these exhibitions; the Collection has great potential for reaching small-town communities...Peterson says that Marxhausen (in Seward) is terrific and "could make you love dead bugs": including him in the I-80 project town meetings was a shrewd move. (Taped)

Gary Zoruba: Also an art instructor at Kearney State, a native Nebraskan who has camped every inch of the state. He'd been skeptical about the I-80 project at first, fearing that the sculptors didn't really understand the Nebraska environment and its tendency to dominate all artifacts within it; he kept his criticisms to himself, however, because he so supported the overall concept and did not want to seem to lend expert opposition to the project. Zoruba teaches art appreciation every year, and finds that most of his students (80% of whom are

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Nebraskans) seem not to even know about the I-80 sculptures. He is a bit discouraged at how little people actually see. He and Peterson have a gallery downtown where wildlife art pays the rent: people do indeed prefer representational art when given a choice. He's found in his teaching and in his gallery that people are much more receptive to art when they can make some direct personal connection to it -- to the scene, to the artist's life or family name, to a similar experience. I asked him what he thought the hidden arts curriculum of small communities might be and suggested several possibilities: he agreed that the random resources offered by an active art club, travelled citizens, the high school art teacher, the unexpectedly talented people who suddenly produce good work constitute the random tacit art curriculum, and that it of course depends on the town...On his wall was a postcard of the Kearney State art department faculty posed as Rembrandt burghers, with glasses, and samples of his own strong clean graphics, details from architectural angles. (Taped).

Mary Lierley: Dr. Mary Lierley, art historian at the college, did her dissertation on the history of the I-80 project (art history, East Texas State University 1982), querrying the artists by questionnaire and visiting the communities. She saw a lot of controversy but found that the artists' residencies in the towns were extremely effective: seeing the artists working seemed to make a difference to people, converting opponents into staunch supporters. I asked her what hidden arts curriculum she had noticed: she said than any exposure to the arts, even through television if necessary, makes the difference. She talked at length about other public sculpture projects she had studied from other states -- Vermont, the lone sculpture on I-70 at Paxico, Kansas -- and all are non-representational and seem to have similar histories of controversy followed by acceptance.

Barbara Saum Avery: Avery runs Studio 13, a commercial gallery downtown in the process of being closed for downtown redevelopment; it included some nice Barteks and other prints. The shop was quiet; an accounting teacher from the college was visiting, and between them I gleaned the following. Avery had been active on the town committee hosting George Baker, the sculptor of the "Nebraska Wind Sculpture" just west of town. Some people had assumed at the time that explicit western Nebraska themes would be better than Baker's modern design, and the opposition "wasn't for art reasons, if you know what I mean": preferences for buffalo or Big Red football players refer to some other criterion. But Baker assembled his piece in the old bus barn downtown, and many people came to watch, comment on and accept it. "Thirty years from now," Avery and her colleague said, this project will endure and people will be impressed with what Nebraska did. She has taught art history at the college part-time, and of 40 students in one class none seen the Kearney piece. Time will be the test; Baker has gone on to do other very interesting things elsewhere. An occasional update feature story in the newspapers would be

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appropriate. Avery, like Elwell in Sidney and Avoboda in Ogallala, had enjoyed the contact with "real artists" at the various receptions; she and the town had appreciated Baker's quiet, private, classy style. The maquette of his piece is exceptionally beautiful and is still somewhere in town.

Assorted brief conversations: The two orange-uniformed groundskeepers at the Brady ("Nebraska Gateway") sculpture had no strong feeling about it one way or another. Their job was to keep the grass trimmed around it and to keep the base caulked against water damage. They said visitors seem to accept it pretty well and to enjoy the stop. One groundskeeper gave me a brochure showing all the sculptures, and pointed to "Crossing the Plains" (York) as one that is "kind of like this one, a pile of rocks, but it has more shape to it." He prefers sculpture that tells a story. (A newspaper clipping in Cozad has Lt. Gov. Whelan describing the Brady piece thusly: "We didn't need to carve a steer or an ear of corn, because we know what they look like. Everyone can see in this what they want to see in it.")...A retired couple heading west, stopping at "Roadway Confluence" in Sidney early one morning were thoroughly enjoying the sculpture, walked around it, took photos of each other beside it, "This is the first one that is really pretty," she said... A small group of teenaged boys eating lunch at a table near "Nebraska Wind Sculpture" (Kearney): I asked if they'd noticed that sculpture behind them and they said, "Oh, is that sculpture? Yeah, sure, I'd noticed it. It's OK."...Doug Elliot, the Nebraska Arts Council's man in western Nebraska, in a phone conversation in Kearney: he visits the western two-thirds of the state, some 30 local arts councils, painting clubs, etc., all volunteers whom he usually meets in cafes. There is a lot of activity in these communities. He's sort of the county extension agent for art and invited me to travel with him sometime ...Motel managers, waitresses, shopkeepers, etc.: I would mention why I was travelling this way, and most would smile with recognition but expressed no strong feelings for or against. The sculptures do seem now to be simply an unquestioned part of the landscape.

VI. Observations of the Hidden Arts Curriculum

Introduction

The week had opened with my interview of George Neubert, director of the Sheldon Art Gallery in Lincoln. Neubert had not been part of the I-80 project; I interviewed him out of an interest in his perspective on the role of museums in public art education. His comments offer a starting point for some general observations and conclusions on the week.

Neubert talked about the role of the art museum, whose primary role, he says, is to preserve and collect American culture, to research, document and finally exhibit objects. This obligation to the

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object first and to the education function second is analagous to the role of research in science, where the research and gathering of knowledge is first and the public availability of the knowledge through publishing is second. The best education, he says, is self-enlightenment; it can be fostered and nurtured by museums but cannot be museums' first goal. In this dedication to the object over individuals, the museum differs from the art center, which reverses the emphasis. The museum curator must seek to reflect the times, be sensitive to the context offered by history, seek objects and artifacts with lasting value, and separate this judgement from a judgement about the prevailing popular taste. Popular taste is not the same thing as aesthetic judgement but aesthetic judgement can be nurtured and developed: while it is easier to attract the public with works of immediate appeal (not defined here), museums' education responsibility is to educate the public to appreciate new works of good quality.

Neubert has had a series of community meetings around Nebraska in his role as gallery director. His observations from these discussions have been that people with some education have more difficulty accepting new or unexpected art than those with less (neither quantity defined): that the "grassroots folks" can admire, for example, the independence of the modern artist even without fully understanding the work, and can accept a work partially on that level, where people with college degrees in non-art areas seem more difficult to "un-educate". Neubert finds that people mistrust art when its function isn't clear but that almost any simple connection to concepts familiar to them can bridge the gap and make a work more accessible. While we cannot expect the general public to understand the advanced vocabulary of artists, the viewer can be encouraged to take some responsibility to take time to look. People do not need a lot of background to appreciate art in its pure form (people do enjoy opera without really knowing music); some immediate reaction to the work needs to be possible. One way to provide this access to "humanize the artist", to demystify the process of art-making, to help people see what artists do. A basic appreciation of the independence of a modern artist is one reaction along these lines; it can be an opening to further education in the business of seeing.

Is there a hidden arts curriculum in these small communities? Yes, and it consists of <u>individuals</u> with a commitment to art and to learning. In his case, in high school in Beatrice (south of Lincoln),it was a young literature teacher whose passion for the subject came across even in the "jocks' English class": the mastery of facts had less impact than the teacher's commitment. Communities in general tend to ignore creative individuals as role models, but these individuals are there and can provide vision and a sense of possibility to those open to them.

Some general principles emerge form those comments and from a consideration of the I-80 sculpture project and the reactions of those involved in it. Granting that the sample I spoke with is small

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and selected in favor of supporters, the themes suggested by this week of conversations are consistent, wide-ranging, and fairly balanced, for my informants had necessarily been in touch with the opposition and were sensitive to the problems raised by the project. The conclusions suggested by this one-week journey should be useful guidelines for further study on the general question of the public arts curriculum of small communities. At the very least they provide guideposts for interpreting the particular experience of one public sculpture project in Nebraska.

Toward a Conceptual Framework of the Public Arts Curriculum: Some Principles

1. Regionalism. I start with this principle because it was by far the broadest source of criticism of the project. The concern that no Nebraskans were among the ten sculptors was pervasive even among some of the strongest supporters of the project, a number of whom felt that including even a few Nebraskans would have deflected much of the protest that ensued. This concern took various forms. 1) Most direct was a concern that non-Nebraskans might not be sufficiently sensitive to the power of the open Nebraska landscape, a general concern best reflected in comments on two sculptures in particular. Van de Bovenkamp's tall and powerfully graceful "Roadway Confluence" at Sidney apparently did not sufficiently account for the force of the western winds, and it is now reinforced with guy wires; several observers who like Linda Howard's "Up/Over" at Ogallala nevertheless feel that the piece is too small for its setting and dwarfed by it. 2) Others feared that non-Nebraskans would be insensitive to the region's history, a fear that seemed to be confirmed by the abstract nature of the designs, all of which avoided the traditional buffalo, Madonna-of-the-Plains, and other emblems of the pioneer heritage. "Erma's Desire" at Grand Island, with its suggestive title and aggressive angular steel design, received the brunt of this sort of criticism and many of my informants referred to it as a kind of epitome of the perceived inappropriateness of the sculptures to Nebraska. 3) Others, including even some artists, resented the implication that excellent art had to come from somewhere else. Interestingly, this concern had a flip side also, evident in a strong pride that Nebraska would be so daring as to accept this abstract modern art from outside and display it so prominently.

The pervasiveness of regionalism in the reaction to the sculpture project has some corollaries. For example, the regional perspective can clearly be a bridge to appreciating modern art when the connections are made clear. This happened with "Roadway Confluence", an undulating configuration of tall aluminum shapes that suddenly "made sense" when the artist explained its connection to the Sidney position as a confluence of trails and roads from Indian times to the present: its thoroughly abstract appearance was accepted by a community that could see its connection to its own heritage. While not all abstract designs are so readily incorporated into their local context, the strength of the regional perspective suggests the importance of finding ways to

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illuminate the connections between art and the regional setting. My resources in Kearney suggested that George Baker's deliberate use of wind in his "Nebraska Wind Sculpture"--an otherwise thoroughly abstract construction of disks and convex hanging steel shapes, but one that floats on a pond and is pushed by the wind--contributed to its acceptance by the community. This is not to say that the most effective modern art must deliberately refer to local context; it is to say, however, that efforts to help people see connections between their local experiences and the artist's use of the medium can be constructive.

The success of the touring exhibitions of the Nebraskan Art Collection at Kearney may have several messages. These artists are by definition all Nebraskans to begin with, and thus surely lack the intimidating quality of art brought from the "outside"; the works celebrate distinctly local resources and talent, and the best of them (the collection includes some major American artists such as Catlin, Bodmer, Henri) are a bridge to more. The subject-matter of these works on tour is selected to reflect the communities they will visit, an organizational device the managers feel is very effective in making works accessible. The regional flavor of this collection seems to contribute substantially to communities' acceptance of it--a clear contrast to the basis of much of the I-80 project but a variation on the same theme.

Ultimately the regional bias of public reaction to modern art reflects an "us and them" distinction. To the extent that regionalism governed much of the protest of the I-80 project, it acknowledged that modern art is <u>not</u> "us" and that there is a conflict; it reflected a resentment at all the things this dichotomy represented. In the cases where regional perspective worked <u>for</u> acceptance of the project, it was from having found a connection to the local perspective or from a pride in being daring enough to overcome the conflict and show the world that Nebraska is not afraid of modern art. An awareness of the special situation of Nebraska and the Great Plains governed both the positive and the negative reactions to the project. It seems to shape much of the public reaction to both representational and abstract art.

2. <u>Work</u>. Not as dominant a theme as regionalism, the importance of work nonetheless emerged quite consistently. The project required that the artists work in the communities as much as possible, and those who actually created their works in downtown space or on site consistently drew crowds of curious or appreciative onlookers. The residency requirement was an important element of the program, for it demonstrated to the public that the making of art was indeed heavy, hard <u>work</u> and not merely a matter of whimsical creative ideas. Bradford Graves, carving huge limestone pieces on-site at York in 100-degree heat, impressed the locals. Von Ringelheim's engineering problems in erecting "Arrival" were practical problems that farmers and builders could appreciate. Van de Bovenkamp had a huge task in erecting the "Roadway Confluence" and needed a

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small army of volunteers to help. Linda Howard's task of assembling huge I-beams into the graceful curve of "Up/Over" was an engineering job. And so on. The public appreciated the work involved, and even the vocal opponent in Seward could grudgingly respect the work required of the York piece. There is a suspicion, I think, especially in communities as imbued with the work ethic and respect for independence as midwestern farm communities are, that artists don't really work as hard as the rest of us. Those not trained in art have difficulty seeing the extent to which any work of art is a product of painstaking problem-solving. The massive size and scale of the public sculptures in the I-80 project offered a kind of extreme, to be sure, but as such they illustrated the care and labor and precision that must go into these works whose finished state may have no visible function. If the public needs immediate connection to works of art in order to read them, as Neubert suggested, an appreciation of the work involved seems to be effective for many reasons. It connects the artist's activities to the public's own, it demonstrates that art-making can be a job like any other, it can heighten an appreciation for the sheer technical skill involved, and it probably shortens the distance normally perceived between practical work and artistic work. It makes the work of art accessible in normal terms; as such it confers a certain respectability both to the worker and to the resulting product. An appreciation for the work involved in the abstract sculptures of the I-80 project seems only to have enhanced their appeal.

3. Participation. This concept is closely allied with work, but deserves its own comment. The public's appreciation of the artist's work was different from the insights available through the communities' and individuals' own participation in the project. The project was designed to maximize community involvement: the artists visited schools, spoke at club meetings, lived with the community, worked on site, welcomed questions and assistance. Children's enthusiasm drew in their parents. Businesses contributed supplies and equipment. Volunteers donated labor. In the most active communities, the project was a gala community event involving a cross-section of the population. Everyone was welcome. The cooperative spirit was supportive of the artists, and it was fun.

The level of participation ensured that the sculpture project was not perceived as elitist, and when it worked best it worked in those terms. The sculpture became a community event, and it broke down the barriers between "us" and "them". And while participation at this high public level is only rarely so possible, the success of this element of the project demonstrates the importance of accessibility in general. People simply watching from the sidelines could learn that works of art are not simply mysteries that appear before the public, that art obviously draws on the experience of the artist and that this experience may have connections to one's own life. In the I-80 project's case the public's participation was explicit and visible. In the

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more unusual case of the public encountering finished works for the first time, some opening for "participation" on some level must also be present--an appreciation of the subject-matter is the most usual, but exhibitions of regional art also suggest that celebrations of local talent or of local media also provide an opening making works accessible to a public unfamiliar with "art". Participation is the opposite of remoteness; the I-80 project demonstrated this to the extreme, but the principle seems to apply generally.

4. Civic Pride. Civic pride worked for support of the project in two ways. There was the pride each community seemed to feel in having been chosen to host an artist and claim one of the ten sculptures--a pride seen generally in civic boosterism and football rivalries and focussed in this case on an art project. And there was a more general pride people felt in Nebraska ("of all places") taking on such a project-- a kind of proud defiance of the rest of the country to continue seeing Nebraska as a cultural wasteland. Both kinds of civic pride refer at base to the us/them distinction, but they use it to full exuberant advantage: we are not accustomed to modern art but we can show them that we're progressive enough to try. I think the civic-pride factor of the local level would have been as strong (maybe stronger) had the sculptures been buffaloes or football players (two earlier suggestions), but I doubt the larger "we-too-can-do-this" pride would have been as strong. Modern art provided a challenge to these communities that they accepted with gusto as a civic responsibility. And as such, it became a shared community project, probably reducing the degree of threat and mystery that individual encounters with modern art can so easily engender. Civic pride as a contribution to the success of the project removed the isolation of the individual encounter with modern art and made it acceptable to ask questions about it in public. It is reasonable to suggest that now that the sculptures are up, settled into their grassy niches, and proudly announced with standard highway signs, they remain a clear symbol of the state's pride in accepting them and that as such they are more accessible than they might be in a formal museum setting, exactly as the organizers of the project had hoped.

5. Individuals. Several of my informants suggested that "individuals" constituted the most effective "hidden arts curriculum" of their communities. The roles of specific individuals and of the large networks of personal contacts in the sculpture communities was crucial to the public acceptance of the project. The young lady in Cozad said that "all the higher-class people were involved", and indeed it seemed important that established civic leaders support the project everywhere--Rotarians, banks, the newspaper editors, Chamber of Commerce staff were all involved. Their support was essential to give the project visibility and credibility. But the best reports of community involvement saw the project involving "everyone", wide cross sections from bankers to blue-collar workers to schoolchildren. The networks of individuals running the local committees were effective to the extent that they too broke down the barriers between "art people" and

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others, making it plain that the object was for the whole community. It was important that the effective individuals had credibility in the community on grounds quite unrelated to any knowledge of "art"; their commitment to the project seemed to signal a kind of acceptability of the project even for those who did not feel knowledgable. They provided an effective bridge between "us" and "art".

VII. Conclusions

The Nebraska I-80 Bicentennial Project was born in Nebraska and presented an exciting challenge to its citizens. Conceived to present the best of contemporary sculpture to the people of the state and to those travelling through it, the project ultimately required the people of the state and of the towns along I-80 to come to terms with "modern art". It took six months of public hearings and legislative debate, and there were grumblings about the inappropriateness and cost of the project, but ultimately the people accepted the challenge and the artworks it produced. Protest was vocal and very specific, but it seems not to have been as widespread as the press reported it to be. Support for the project even at the time was substantial and grounded in an enthusiasm for the challenge and for the statement it would make. Support for the project today seems to be nearly universal; no one I spoke to in a week of conversations could point to any lingering hostility to the project, eight years later. The sculptures are now "part of the landscape", as one informant put it, and they make the lovely rest stops even more interesting.

The story of the project and its acceptance in the various communities involved suggests a number of things about the elements of a "hidden arts curriculum" in these small midwestern towns. One way of understanding the dynamics of this curriculum is to see its various parts as different ways of overcoming the us/them distinction that modern abstract art seems to pose for people not accustomed to encountering it. The chief difficulty with the project seemed to be that it represented something outside the Nebraska experience--non-native artists, designs not obviously drawn form the Nebraska environment of history, designs not immediately "understood" by most people, a statement foreign to the public-monument tradition of the courthouse square. The winning designs by artists from both coasts seemed to reinforce the public's perception that modern art was not what Nebraska was really all about. The protest of the project was largely in those terms. It is more interesting, however, that the support for the project was ultimately argued in those terms as well: America's 200th birthday was a time for Nebraska to try something different and show the world it could. The project succeeded because its appeal to the public's civic pride and to its trust in the local all worked together to overcome the negative pull of regionalist preferences and to nurture the positive connections to modernist design that a regional bias permitted.

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As an exploration of the "hidden arts curriculum of small towns", a week along I-80 eight years later was immensely instructive. The reactions of the community people involved in the project, and their articulate reports of the reactions of many others, revealed surprisingly consistent themes about what worked and what the chief problems were. Their experience has suggested a number of principles that might describe this tacit "arts curriculum" both for that project and more generally. It will remain for subsequent explorations of other community-related arts projects to test the validity of these principles in other settings.

Meanwhile, however, I am grateful to the many people I met. With a copy of this lengthy report, I thank them each for their time, their enthusiasm, their honesty, and their kindness to this traveller through their state.

Elizabeth (Dana)
Vallance
March 1985

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